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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA WINS SOCHI MAYORAL RACE AMID FRAUD
ALLEGATIONS

REF: MOSCOW 988

Classified By: Political MC Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Amid allegations of ballot-rigging and electoral fraud, United Russia's Anatoliy Pakhomov won Sochi's April 26 mayoral election with 77 percent of the "official vote." Opposition candidate Boris Nemtsov took 13.5 percent in the official count, and Communist Party (KPRF) candidate Yuriy Dzaganiya received 7 percent. Nemtsov and Dzaganiya, who both suffered from severely limited media access, have alleged gross manipulation of media coverage and the early voting system. Accounting for up to 30,000 votes, early voters were mostly bused in by their employers and cast a reported 90 percent of their ballots for Pakhomov. Nemtsov and Dzaganiya have promised to file official complaints, but Pakhomov's victory is almost certainly complete. Some establishment critics nonetheless have welcomed Nemtsov's presence on the ballot as a political step forward. End Summary.

Exit Polls Differ, But United Russia Wins Official Count

¶2. (SBU) In the April 26 mayoral race in the 2014 Winter Olympics host city, official results gave 77 percent of the vote to United Russia's Anatoliy Pakhomov, more than 30 percent higher than predicted by a pre-election survey conducted on behalf of the International Republican Institute (IRI). Solidarity opposition leader Boris Nemtsov took 13.5 percent of the vote; local Communist Party leader Yuriy Dzaganiya received 7 percent; and the remaining three candidates each won less than 2 percent. Nemtsov released results April 26 from his campaign's own exit polls, which gave Pakhomov 46 percent and Nemtsov 35 percent. His results, however, did not include early voting. (See reftel for background on the election, early voting, and the controversial culling of the ballot down to 6 candidates.)

Most Electoral Violations Blamed on Early Voting

¶3. (SBU) Nemtsov and KPRF's Dzaganiya have both alleged that most violations stemmed from early voting and voter coercion. Media reported that early voting turnout was as high as 30,000, which would constitute just over 10 percent of registered voters. Total voter turnout was reported as 43 percent. Early voting violations were alleged from its first day on April 15, when Nemtsov, Dzaganiya, and Just Russia's Yuriy Kurpitko (subsequently removed from the ballot) complained that employees of hospitals and hotels had been bused in to vote. Frog-marched to polls en masse, Nemtsov claimed, these early voters reportedly cast more than 90 percent of their votes for Pakhomov. Early voting problems emerged on election day as well, when dozens of voters reportedly were turned away after being told that logs indicated they had already cast their ballots. The Golos

Association, which observed the lead-up to the election, issued an April 24 report that criticized early voting as an "administrative technology," adding that "reports of the busing of voters indicate actual violation of the election law."

14. (SBU) Other alleged electoral violations on April 26 included United Russia flags hanging at polling places, polling places left unattended, and the use of a bus as a polling place on the Russian border with Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region. Abkhazians with Russian passports were expected to vote at that location; however, media reported that by the end of the day only four homeless people had done so.

15. (SBU) KPRF and Nemtsov's campaign both reported that electoral commission members refused to accept some formal complaints. Ilya Yashin, Nemtsov's campaign head, told us one electoral commission member called the police when observers refused to leave a polling place after trying to file a complaint. In that incident, police briefly detained, then released, AmCit Keith Gessen, a writer for "New Yorker" magazine who was accompanying observers. Nemtsov and KPRF both have promised to file several official complaints. Notably but unsurprisingly, Kremlin-allied Just Russia has made no high-level objection to its candidate's removal from the ballot or to the conduct of the election.

Comment

16. (C) Sochi -- known as Putin's town after its Olympic

MOSCOW 00001091 002 OF 002

designation -- was never going to be allowed to slide into the opposition orbit. The culling of the ballot to six candidates combined with Pakhomov's disproportionate media and administrative resources to pre-ordain United Russia's first round victory. Early voting only increased the margin -- although perhaps too well, since its zealous use accounted for up to 10 percent of all registered voters. With the electoral simulacrum complete, however, complaints from Nemtsov and KPRF likely will be denied and dismissed quickly as Pakhomov is inaugurated into office. Some voices critical of the government, like Nezavisimaya Gazeta editor Konstantin Remchukov, told us that last year Nemtsov would not have been entertained on the ballot. Putting a positive spin on the pre-ordained outcome, Remchukov posited that slowly "the logic of competition will begin to dominate." While Medvedev advisor Boris Makarenko hewed to a similar line in an April 24 meeting, the disproportionate trouncing of the opposition field sets a less positive tone.

BEYRLE